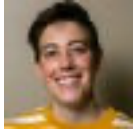


Sheboygan's city administrator has earned over \$15K since being put on paid leave. His attorney alleges city leaders conspired against him.



Maya Hilty

Sheboygan Press

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SHEBOYGAN - Sheboygan City Administrator Todd Wolf is still on paid leave more than a month after the city council put him on administrative leave pending an investigation into his conduct.

City leaders have provided little information about the investigation, saying it is a personnel matter, and Mayor Ryan Sorenson said he does not know when the investigation is expected to finish.

Wolf's attorney, Jennifer DeMaster, said she is "unable to comment" on concerns voiced by residents about Wolf's response to personnel issues in the weeks before his suspension.

DeMaster instead alleges in a news release that Wolf was suspended after two members of a Sheboygan community group promoting diversity and inclusion targeted him, in collusion with city elected officials, because Wolf refused to give them money to hire diversity consultants for the city.

DeMaster and Wolf's accounts have some inconsistencies and factual inaccuracies.

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In a joint written statement, the two community members, Alexandra Guevara and Jamie Haack, said Wolf's allegations "are simply not true."

The statement says Guevara and Haack "at no point" asked for money — at a meeting Wolf set up with them — or worked with elected officials to "target" Wolf.

Some people rallied behind Wolf at a meeting of the Republican Party of Sheboygan County he attended in late November.

As the highest-paid city employee, Wolf earns about \$600 a day and has earned more than \$15,000 since being put on leave last month.

Here's what we know about Wolf's administrative leave and his allegations.

Wolf was put on leave as a result of concerns about his conduct, city leaders say

The city council voted 8-2 to put Wolf on leave "for the purpose of investigating allegations and concerns regarding his conduct," city council president Barb Felde said.

Mayor Sorenson declined to comment on what concerns prompted the investigation, citing the ongoing investigation.

The suspension came three weeks after some residents called Wolf's leadership into question — publicly and in emails to the council — following the Sheboygan Press reporting on Wolf's response to a city director repeating a racial slur in an internal meeting.

Some residents also raised concerns about Sheboygan's lack of a human resources director and allegations of sexual harassment and retaliation in the city.

The former human resources director resigned in June after filing a complaint with the state Equal Rights division alleging Wolf retaliated against her for opposing sexual harassment in the police department.

On Nov. 10, a few days after Wolf was placed on leave, the state found probable cause that Wolf discriminated against the former human resources director. An administrative law judge will eventually hear the case. A date for the hearing had not been set as of early this month.

The city hired outside attorney Jill Hall on Nov. 14 to investigate Wolf's conduct.

"There are many components and allegations that need to be addressed by the investigator, so we can not provide a defined dated timeline for it," Sorenson said in a statement. "We hope that the investigation will be wrapped up soon."

City attorney Chuck Adams said he does not yet know if the results of the investigation will be made public.

Wolf's attorney says he was suspended because he refused a political extortion threat

DeMaster said Wolf "has no knowledge" of allegations against him, characterizing his suspension as a "sudden" and "politically underhanded" move, though Wolf's emails suggest he was aware of some allegations against him.

Wolf wrote in an email to city council the day he was suspended, prior to the council meeting, that he faced "false accusations" in the press and publicly. He also sent the council an eight-page list of his accomplishments as city administrator for their "convenience."

DeMaster did not comment on what false accusations Wolf allegedly faced, saying city leaders prohibited him from speaking on city matters.

Wolf and DeMaster instead allege that two members of the Sheboygan DEIB, a community group promoting diversity, equity and inclusion, worked with elected officials to remove Wolf after he refused a demand for \$70,000 to hire diversity consultants for the city.

Wolf's and DeMaster's accounts of the meeting at which the community members allegedly demanded money, in early October, differ.

DeMaster's news release says Wolf had the meeting arranged "following internal pressure from the Mayor and certain Alderpersons."

Wolf's email to the council says: "In late August and September 2022"—presumably after an incident in which a director said a racial slur in an internal meeting Aug. 22 — "I made several calls with DEIB leaders in the community and was referred to the 'Sheboygan DEIB' group, where a City employee set up a meeting with 'Sheboygan DEIB' reps ...

"I expected at this meeting to be provided with solutions, a business proposal, strategies or a list of trusted experts to retain for DEIB training," Wolf wrote.

Wolf alleged the community members "immediately" asked for money and threatened to oppose Wolf unless he paid them.

He "swiftly left the meeting after the women began yelling," DeMaster's news release alleges.

While DeMaster's news release alleges the members of the community group demanded \$70,000 at the initial meeting, Wolf said in his email to the city council that he only later learned the amount. DeMaster declined to comment on how Wolf allegedly later learned the group was requesting the amount of \$70,000.

Guevara and Haack said in a statement that Wolf's accusations are false. They said city employees invited them to meet over lunch at the Black Pig Restaurant, and two other city employees besides Wolf attended the meeting.

DeMaster's news release confirmed the meeting took place Oct. 5, but she said she is unable to comment on where the meeting took place and who else was present.

Guevara and Haack's statement said that at the meeting, "City officials stated they were interested in incorporating DEI practices at the City level to better address situations related to racism and sexual harassment."

"We clarified that the Sheboygan DEIB Steering Committee does not provide consulting services. ... To help the City achieve its goals, we suggested that the City might consider hiring DEI consultants to assist generally with its ongoing DEI work. We also suggested that the City consider hiring an HR director who had DEI knowledge and experience," Guevara and Haack's statement said.

"We never 'demanded' that the City hire such consultants, we did not offer consulting services — either individually or on behalf of Sheboygan DEIB — and we never asked to be compensated in any way," the statement said. "The lunch was polite and cordial; there was never any screaming or aggressive behavior by anyone."

Wolf alleges in his email to the council that following the meeting, the community members "(made) good on their threats" to him by informing the Sheboygan Press of the August incident in which a city director said a racial slur, saying the Sheboygan Press was not aware of the incident until early October.

Wolf's allegation is false because the Sheboygan Press had already interviewed Wolf, as well as other city leaders, about the racial slur incident in September, weeks before Wolf's Oct. 5 meeting with Guevara and Haack.

DeMaster said she was "unable to comment" on the fact that Wolf's allegation that community members went to the media to target him publicly after his meeting with them is based on false information.

Although DeMaster's news release alleges the community members colluded with elected officials to remove Wolf, she later said she did not know if that was true.

"Sometimes there'll be a couple people that have a little screw loose or two, that want to come out and demand these things or make threats, and that's fine," DeMaster said at a Nov. 28 Republican Party of Sheboygan County meeting, where she gave a "rundown" of Wolf's situation.

"The problem is ... whether those people in the community are working with elected officials to try to get rid of the thorn in their side (Todd Wolf) that is saying no to this, and we don't know that," she said. "We expect to get information about this, but we don't know."

Wolf levels new allegations against a city director

In two prior interviews about the incident, Wolf told a reporter that city Director of Planning and Development Chad Pelishek said the N-word in an August meeting of department heads, while saying that a resident had said the slur at a neighborhood meeting and asking fellow staff how the city can help address such situations.

"Chad brought up the fact that he was up against some racial slurs, and he did use the phrase, not with the intent to hurt or harm anyone, but with the intent to help others understand," Wolf said in September. "When he said it, he thought he was in a safe space — and obviously one person (another director) let that out to their friends group. But she did not make a comment, she did not address it at the time."

Wolf later alleged in his email to the council that Pelishek did not say the slur until the other director "demanded" he tell her what racial slur was said.

In a Nov. 7 email to the council, Wolf asked for the council's support in writing up the female director.

Many city directors were present at the meeting at which Pelishek said the slur. All directors contacted by the Sheboygan Press in September declined to comment.



Wolf and attorney rally support from county Republican Party

DeMaster's news release contains allegations of "egregious corruption" in the city and other claims.

For example, the news release said the city council "snuck in late at night an oral motion to immediately suspend" Wolf "within hours" of him reporting his concerns of an extortion threat to the city, calling it a "secretive measure" and saying "his statements led to his immediate suspension."

As is routine, the council meeting agenda was distributed by the City Clerk's Office days prior and noted the city council may act on closed-session personnel matters.

In emails with a reporter, DeMaster questioned the authenticity of a copy of Wolf's Nov. 7 email to the council, obtained through a public records request, saying a reporter's questions referencing the email were "premised on

false/fake made up implications of records" and that Wolf's email was something a reporter seemed to have "made up out of thin air."

DeMaster said the email was confidential and should not have been released as a public record.

At a Republican Party of Sheboygan County meeting, DeMaster posed Wolf's suspension as a threat to transparency over taxpayer dollars and an attack from "cancel-culture type people."

"The Republican Party as a whole agrees that equality is important, diversity is important," DeMaster said. "The problem is when it goes to the point of being insidious, divisive and that becomes the discriminatory faction because that's what's happening with some of these people."

She added: "As Todd kept getting more and more just inundated with things he wasn't allowed to say because of his race, because of his gender, ... because of what you look like, you're not allowed to say these kinds of terms ... these kinds of situations created a very difficult work environment."

She added, "There are good, great city employees right here in Sheboygan that are having to go through and seeing these things happen and they just want to do their job and Todd was the one that has been protecting them."

Wolf has said he supports diversity, equity and inclusion since he was hired as city administrator.

Wolf attended the party meeting and was applauded, but did not speak.

Republican Party chairman Russ Otten said at the meeting the party would set up a "defense fund" for Wolf.

A GiveSendGo fund to "help cover legal and living costs" for Wolf's family, which alleges Wolf has been "victimized by a group of WOKE radicals," had raised \$3,850 as of Thursday.

More:Cities are rarely liable for damage from potholes. That can be a harsh reality for people injured, like this Sheboygan woman.

More:Sheboygan increases fines for harassing election officials. 'It's about election integrity,' city council member says.

What does the city administrator do?

The city administrator is appointed by and works under the direction of the city council, with input from the mayor.

The city administrator is responsible for managing day-to-day operation of city government, including implementing council policies, developing the annual budget, supervising all department heads and leading long-term planning for the city.

Sheboygan's city council created the city administrator position in 2011. The city had long debated the change and implemented it almost unanimously soon after then-mayor Bob Ryan again came under scrutiny for repeated allegations of heavy drinking, according to Sheboygan Press articles from 2011.

City elected officials believed the city administrator would provide more consistency in city administration, improve communication among departments and between elected officials and department heads, remove some politics from decision-making and allow for more long-term planning, according to the report from a 2010 study contracted by the city.

Wolf is Sheboygan's third city administrator, hired by the council in June 2020, after the prior administrator, Darrell Hofland, announced his retirement. Wolf was city council president at the time, having served on the council for five years, and worked as a business development manager at Curt G. Joa Inc.

According to city ordinance, the city administrator can be removed only for cause by a four-fifths vote of the common council. That means the vote of eight of the 10 council members is required to remove an administrator for inefficiency, neglect of duty, official misconduct or malfeasance in office.

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